

1. ADVANTAGE + IDENTITY: NEAT DISCOURSE, LOOSE CONNECTION

Singapore's Medium of Instruction Policy

UNNATURAL EDUCATION

In 1956, the All-Party Committee of the Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education inaugurated Singapore's basic strategy of "equal treatment" for its constituent language communities (Gopinathan, Ho, & Saravanan, 2004, p. 230). Subsequently, in the 1978 *Report on the Ministry of Education* (also known as the Goh Report), the emergent nation's inherited education system was described as "unnatural". This unnaturalness derived from the fact that 85% of Singapore's children were taught in English and Mandarin, neither of which they spoke at home.

Speculating imaginatively on this state of affairs, the authors of the Goh Report commented that if children in England were required to be educated in Russian and Mandarin (resulting from some "world calamity") but continued to speak English at home, this would cause "the British educational system...some of the problems" then confronting post-colonial Singapore (Goh & Education Study Team, 1979, p. 1-1). Forty years of hindsight affords some clear vision. While many children in the world do indeed speak home languages that coincide with the official code of their society and that are the medium through which they are taught, Singapore's children were, and are, educated less "unnaturally" than these authors supposed. And, importantly, while being educated in the home tongue essentially means to encounter no disruption between the home and school languages, increasing numbers of children are intentionally enrolled in programmes delivered in languages other than their home tongues. Perversely, even today, Singapore's children are still being subjected to such "unnatural" education but they and their education system constitute a remarkable success story in forging a post-traditional society problematising natural links between nation, state, language and identity. 1956 was a fateful year for reconfiguring post-colonial language arrangements among Singapore's near neighbours too, with both Sri Lanka and Malaysia making crucial policy moves similar to Singapore's by promoting national languages and removing inherited English as the medium of instruction (Bailey, 1998; De Silva, 1998; Wong & Hong, 1975), both of which have recently, also, been reversed.

This chapter addresses the question of the relation of language of instruction (LoI) to children's home languages, asking whether it is more or less common that these coincide today than in 1956. In general terms, the chapter addresses whether teaching children in a language they do not speak at home is desirable?

When it is unavoidable, how can language mismatch be designed to be maximally effective for both language learning and academic knowledge? The chapter refers to some international practices in developed and developing country settings, as a prelude to illuminating the Singapore experience of reconciling LoI, multilingualism, and the making of a cohesive and economically competitive nation.¹ For the most part the chapter discusses the policy thinking of key leaders of Singapore's policymaking.

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

In 1953, the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued an important statement on the issue of LoI entitled "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education". This statement had a direct impact on education policymaking, inspiring proponents of "mother tongue" education across the world, particularly in post-colonial developing country contexts, but also among indigenous educators in developed countries. UNESCO declared:

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. But as was said earlier, it is not always possible to use the mother tongue in school and, even when possible, some factors may impede or condition its use. (1953, p. 11)

UNESCO's three touchstones—*psychological meaning*, *sociological conditions* and *educational efficacy*—were tempered by pragmatic realities, a concession to feasibility not always referred to when the declaration was used in public lobbying for mother tongues to be the preferred LoI.

Emergent post-colonial nations inherited education systems that had privileged the language and education practices of the colonial administration. New nationalisms invariably look to "authentic" national languages to do the work of inculcating national cohesion, indigenising public administration and securing a culturally authentic polity, but are forced to retain colonial languages for stimulating economic development, continuing inherited state operations and conducting international relations. These divergent claims for policy attention present immense challenges to new and often struggling states.

The 1953 Declaration, as it came to be called, triggered a long debate, hampered by a shortage empirical research evidence to sustain its claims. The resultant void was often filled by ideological conflict about languages, identity and national allegiances, complicated by historical and political issues and by extreme resource limitations. Responding to the confused picture, policymakers, especially in Africa, have been hesitant to adopt UNESCO's recommended approach and have tended to retain the use of the former colonial languages in public education. Research has sometimes been guilty of not distinguishing strictly linguistic

issues from educational practice, and rarely from questions of national authority and economics.

In 2003, UNESCO returned to the field with a statement based around three principles:

- UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building on the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers;
- UNESCO supports bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies;
- UNESCO supports language as an essential component of inter-cultural education in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

The contrast between these declarations—separated by four decades of experimentation, much failure and too little systematic investigation—is stark. Without axioms and declarative tones about psychology, sociology and pedagogy, new contemporary values are foregrounded—gender equality, linguistically diverse societies, intercultural understanding, fundamental rights—and a new discursive style suggests less attention to the constraints of resources and personnel. UNESCO's 2003 statement reflects this new world. Around this same period, Singapore underwent a dramatic transformation, from a state with an "unnatural" education system to one where, as noted by Pakir (2003), "Educational practice and language policy have helped Singapore move from being a Third World to being a First World country, and its experience in language education may have some direct implications...elsewhere" (p. 267).

LANGUAGES, STATES AND EDUCATION

Languages have long played an intimate role in the construction, consolidation and protection of national states (Ager, 1996). To perform this mobilising and ideological function, languages become more than mere tools of effective communication, but are constituted as uniquely expressive of distinctive cultures. In this process they assume functional power as ethnicities mobilise for national autonomy, hence the notion of "national" languages (Fishman, 1972; Heller, 1999).

In the post-colonial ferment of the 1940s and 1950s, several European powers were ceding national independence to emergent states in Asia and Africa. The model of independent statehood that resulted often emulated the preceding European notions of a singular, standardised national language applied exclusively in the administration of the new states. Often termed the "one nation, one language" model, this kind of state-making had been a prominent feature of European nationalism, and often the very basis of the formation of national states (Lo Bianco, 2005a). Could this model apply to Asian and African nationalisms arising from different historical circumstances, with greater linguistic diversity, and sometimes relying on different claims for national legitimization?

(Mansour, 1993) A key site where these questions are played out is in public education, and Singapore is an excellent case study of the issues, complexities and dilemmas associated with multilingual state-making.

Today new forces compel nations, old and new, to confront issues of Lol, specifically globalisation. The complex process that goes by the name "globalisation" (Henderson, 1999) imposes pressures on national states to cede sovereignty to international institutions and to market economy forces, but these pressures are also cultural (Castells, 1996–1998; Wee, 2000) and contradictory, emphasising simultaneously the global, the local and the regional (Giddens, 1999). These new circumstances further increase the likelihood that thousands of children will encounter a disparity between the language spoken in their homes and the Lol at school.

Contemporary globalisation is only a continuation of ongoing processes of internationalisation (Hopkins, 2002) but is distinctive for being driven by free market ideologies of economic integration, and it leads to demand for languages appropriate to this economic modernity. Lauded as codes for "wider communication", a small number of languages (pre-eminently English) erode the space of languages lacking state support, such as traditional languages of tribal groups. However, even as the languages of wider communication become internationalised they change, evolving locally expressive forms. Fishman (2001) has called the ethos of our times "incorporative modernity", involving pressure from mainstream advanced society for consumerist individualism and participation in mass culture. Social groupings resistant to this contemporary ethos are relentlessly brought into the interlinked net of global capital or are disappearing at an accelerating rate. For Singapore, impressive success in capitalist consumerism impels a need for "creating" local culture (Wee, 2000), and for national imagining, of which language consolidation is only one part.

However, globalisation is not just a force for homogenisation. It also produces unprecedented mobility across the world (Castles & Miller, 1998); both the poor and the wealthy are on the move, legally and not so legally. These population transfers have meant that national populations have diversified immensely in recent decades; countries of emigration, such as Ireland, Japan and Italy, now are host countries of immigrants. The result is that increasing numbers of children are taught in languages they do not speak at home. As if to echo the speculations of the Goh Report, today's English schoolchildren, mostly immigrants, have their education delivered in a Lol different from their home language at British schools. There is also a small but growing number of English-speaking "natives" whose families opt for prestigious education delivered via a language other than English, in the expectation that this will produce higher rates of proficiency than traditional foreign language teaching. This may or may not be a "world calamity" but it has produced globalised multiculturalism, with its attendant challenges to public policy—concerns about inequalities faced by minorities, reactive politics of national nostalgia, and new kinds of education aimed at ensuring social cohesion. No institution has been more affected by these changes than public education, which in the past operated on essential assumptions about its client groups being

broadly consonant with national cultural norms, now radically altered to socialise both the native young and newcomers whose cultural and linguistic origins lie elsewhere.

Alongside the mobility of the destitute and the technically able, however, elite mobility is also high and growing, generating not only massive ethnic diversification in previously nearly homogenous states, but also social stratification of new kinds, hybrid identifications and complex relations with language education (Lo Bianco, 2001a).

The issue of Lol in contemporary education arises mostly out of the resultant disparity between official state languages, languages of wider communication and economic power, and local languages. In the global world, just like under colonial conditions, there is little symmetry between states, prestige or dominant languages, and population demographics. Also contributing to these disparities is the emergence of international benchmarks and standards of certification in education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998), especially at the post-compulsory levels. The domination of science and technology by a small number of languages results in the disproportionate generation of new knowledge in some languages, and the vast cost of translation for others (Kaplan, 1993). Under conditions of competitive, linked and rapidly integrating labour markets, the demand for education delivered in languages of portability, credentialing and new knowledge increases commensurately.

The collective effect of these tendencies is to make the classrooms of more and more countries multilingual, and more ethnically and religiously diverse.² In summary, six interlocking developments create this demand for more multilingual education alongside a heightened demand for English-medium education. One clear pattern is that entire stages of education, or entire specialisations, are delivered in languages other than home languages in more and more countries. This is already the case with management degrees which, even in the major non-English-speaking cities of Europe, are increasingly marketed globally and taught in English. These developments are:

- Immigration-stimulated language diversity in more states as a consequence of economic growth, declining fertility rates in developed societies, ageing, and the consequent inability to meet labour demands from domestic sources.
- Standardisation and benchmarking of education accompanied by and promoting instrumental demand for English-medium certification of learning. The demand for the acquisition of English as an auxiliary language of commerce has many facets, including the restoration of English in states where it had been restricted (Sri Lanka and Malaysia are two states where English has gained extended social and educational legitimacy and functions since 1999), the devoting of whole sectors or stages of education to the English medium, the proliferation of means of accreditation of English proficiency in both general and specialised ways, and the association of English in some areas as closely connected with democratisation and capitalist consumerism (Hausmann, 2002).
- In some niche sectors trade-linked globalisation has led to strategic planning for foreign (non-English) language study, evident in some English-speaking states.

Allied to this is foreign language demand from national security concerns. These two issues, security and exposure to particular trading zones dominated by languages other than English have stimulated some policymaking in English-speaking societies for a small number of foreign languages, for example, Arabic in the United States (Lo Bianco, 2004), and Japanese, Mandarin and Indonesian in Australia (Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2002; Rudd, 1994), and pressures for foreign language planning in the UK (Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000).

- Processes of reconciliation with indigenous populations, and the extension of human rights rationales to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of minority groups, have also been a contributor to multilingual policies, (e.g., Philippines, Castro, 2002), the Native American Languages Act of 1991 in the United States and multicultural education policies in several states; though not as extensively as economic rationales since human rights warrants (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994), as languages are struggling for space in public discourse.
- The emergence of supranational structures, such as the European Union (EU), and its need to manage multilingualism (Gubbins & Holt, 2002; Lo Bianco, 2001b, 2003; Phillipson, 2003), best exemplified by the European Convention on Regional and Minority Languages of 1992, which opened up state support for languages that the national states comprising the EU had long suppressed in the pursuit of singular notions of national cohesion.
- Reinforcing these patterns has been the spread of human capital theories of education. Basing education decision making on thinking which links schooling to the labour market, especially in the context of more open economic borders, makes it more likely that a higher proportion of learners will need to achieve success measured against international benchmarks of acceptability. Human capital theories direct attention away from natural endowments of raw materials or other “inherited” economic advantages towards economies functioning on the basis of investments in knowledge. These tend to favour education delivered and certified in a small number of languages.

Effectively, these changes spread the problem of LoI on a global scale. Some enhance multilingual education prospects; others restrict such prospects. All, however, challenge the traditional linguistic organisation of national states, which is predicated on the principle of linguistic uniformity.

SINGAPORE

Singapore is an increasingly English-dominant Chinese society in a Malay part of the world, an island socially as well as physically. Its most distinguishing feature in world bilingual terms is not the configuration of languages involved, though the particular arrangement is unique, but the orthographic conventions and language genetics.

Essentially Singapore combines four languages, each from a different language family, and three orthographic systems. The Chinese languages are Sino-Tibetan, English is Indo-European, Malay is Austronesian, and Tamil Dravidian. This rare

combination of linguistic typology is rarer because it features in a formal education system. The genetics of the languages are further complicated by the orthographic systems they use.

Expressed in binary pairs, according to the type of literacy coding-decoding demanded of biliterates, the most straightforward pairing is *Malay*><*English*, both of which are alphabetic roman systems, with minor differences between them. The dominant pairing however is *Mandarin*><*English*, which involves two logographic systems (complex and simplified) with alphabetic roman. The *Tamil*><*English* pairing involves the syllabic Brahmi system (but with a marked diglossia between spoken and written forms), with the alphabetic non-diglossic roman for English.

In practice no student is expected to be engaged in gaining high literate capability in logographic, alphabetic and syllabic modes, and most are expected to gain academic-cognitive literacy only in alphabetic roman—large numbers in this plus logographic script, and very small numbers in syllabic writing. The content and order of the literacy expectation of schooling is therefore highly stratified. English delivers high and de-contextualised academic demands; Mandarin has elevated demands in academic work but not to the level of English; and Tamil and Malay deliver largely ethnicity-affirming or culturally oriented content.

These features mark the Singapore language ecology as dramatically unlike any other, with the result that the international literature supplies little precedent or guidance. The bulk of the success literature in bilingual education is European or Canadian in origin and invariably deals with cognate languages and identical writing systems.

These educational literacy functions reflect a socio-cultural and political order, which can be characterised as follows. The mother tongues (Chinese dialects, Malay and Tamil) are absent from the economy and public institutions and function as identity ethnolects. English functions as a kind of metalect for all ethnic groups, especially in economic-technical domains, but has in the past decade gained identity functions across ethnic groups, and at the colloquial level appears to have gained identity-marking function as well. In this respect, English can be termed Singapore's metalect, the language of maximal functionality. Mandarin appears to be evolving into a national metalect too, but not for non-Chinese Singaporeans and not, obviously, for English monolinguals. No one else can afford to be monolingual. Mandarin appears to index an emergent political identity as well, and could be termed a politicolect. As discussed below, this seems to reverse a historical tendency with the closure of the Chinese-medium Nantah University.

In his 1982 discussion of the sociology of languages in Singapore, Platt pointed out that the only bilingual education during the colonial period was at “English-medium schools where Latin was taught at the secondary level” (p. 27). Bilingual education was instituted after “internal self-government” in 1959, and primary education became compulsory. Singapore's language planning is also unusual in the extent of its deliberate use of public campaigns to modify people's language behaviours. Platt identifies three such campaigns. The *Speak Mandarin Campaign*, launched on September 7, 1979, aimed largely at converting Chinese dialect

speakers to the use of Mandarin, so the target was not English but the dialects of Chinese. Platt cites the reasons given for this as relating to "efficiency" and quotes *The Straits Times* Foreign Editor (1979, November 6), who compared Mauritius and Luxembourg to argue that some people have too many languages, which thus "burdens" the learning process. As we see below, this idea is also found in official documents that attribute economic success to monolingualism, citing Japan, the United States, Germany and France, and "modernity business" as further warrant for restricting the number of languages. A binary between English for "progress and science" (while rejecting the "deficiencies of western culture") and Mandarin for traditional Chinese values was prominent during this time. The second campaign aimed to encourage Malays to *Use More English* (Platt, 1982, pp. 31–32). The third campaign was the *Improve Your English Campaign*, which aimed to encourage people to move along Singapore's speech continuum to the "post-Creole end", that is, away from the sub-variety of colloquial Singapore English and towards "acrolectal standard British models".

Traversing similar territory is Kuo and Jernudd's 1988 study of Singapore's sociolinguistics. Although these writers report similar salient features, such as a characteristically dominant ideology of pragmatism, they also note a formal ceremonial role for Malay; a notion that English, not being Asian in origin, can be ethnically neutral (though the income differentials clearly indicated that English was not socially neutral); and that Mandarin anchors the society in tradition and longevity against the dissipating power of English-mediated modernity. English, of course, connects to the international commerce, science and technology that are the economic lifeblood of the nation. Associations of identity, economy, nation and ideology in relation to language education and campaigning have been strong features of the evolution of public policy on language in Singapore. In few other places in the world has there been such explicit language planning with clear effects on the language ecology of the population, both intended and unintended. However, as Gopinathan, Pakir, Ho and Saravanan (1998) caution, deliberate state intervention in the language life of a community, and even in its public institutions, has ambiguous effects because language does not closely fit the engineering rationality of most models of public planning. Outcomes are sometimes, possibly often, quite different from what planners intend or forecast.

Pakir's (1991) analysis of English in Singapore applies three Vs to denote its critical social characteristics. English is *vital* (meaning that English is the living and working ordinary code of a local community of speakers), it is *variable* (involving proficiency and use variations for various social categories), and English is *volatile* (suggesting that there is still some contest surrounding its social status and that of English-educated locals). However, it is also clear that English is spreading. This means essentially that English is acquiring more users and more uses. As English comes to command more diverse social functions, beyond those the previous social compact appeared to comfortably allocate to English (education, commerce and inter-ethnic public interaction), it is coming to "invade" the home, a space previously seen as the prerogative of the "ethnic" languages. In this expansion English commands and creates local identity formations.

Like all of Singapore's languages, English has native speaker centres outside the country, and this imposes standardising pressures on local speech norms as they are often evaluated against the external standards. Bilinguals in Singapore's language demography are characterised according to their relation to English; Pakir calls them *English-knowing bilinguals*, and her 1991 analysis of the social dimensions of English-knowing Singaporean bilinguals (p. 144) is arranged to contrast two features—*formality* and *proficiency*. Formality ranges from intimacy to formality, and proficiency involves increasing command and skill. The domains of use that typify communication along the measures represent significant features of the interpersonal functions of English in a changing Singapore. At the apex are the most proficient speakers, who use Standard Singapore English, while speakers at the bottom deploy Singapore Colloquial English.

One of the most distinctive features of Singaporean language planning has been the Speak Mandarin Campaign. One key motivation was to ensure that among the Chinese ethnic community, the lingua franca would be a Chinese tongue and not English. This unifying integrative aim has since been bolstered by motivations about the projected economic power of mainland China and the likely new international prestige of Mandarin. However, some moves worked against Mandarin, when the main Chinese-medium higher education institution, Nanyang University (or Nantah), converted to English medium.

According to Gopinathan et al. (1998), although the Goh Report established the essential principles of plurilingual education, medium of instruction rights, and the role of English, this linguistic compact has already been adapted to changing needs and circumstances and needs to change more drastically. They comment and recommend that "the state will find it increasingly difficult to manage language issues, and in trying to do so would put its credibility at risk" (p. 248). Examining the evolution of language policy over time, these authors (themselves "products of Singapore's experiments in multiracial engineering" as Wang Gungwu remarks on the flyleaf) show the progressive language concentrations in households—essentially increases for English between 1990 and 2000, increases for Mandarin over the same period, a decline for Chinese dialects, relative stability for Malay, and a small decline for Tamil. In addition, the bilingual pairings have changed. There are fewer Malay-knowing ethnic Chinese bilinguals, and an almost complete loss of Baba Malay. There are increases in Chinese- and Tamil-proficient Malay bilinguals. As with other studies, they show significant income disparities, so that English-knowing bilinguals and English monolinguals are considerably advantaged in income and occupational status.

These data show how the Singapore experience of planning the statuses of languages via education institutions in a society with a tighter than average link between education and the labour market has resulted in the consolidation and aggregation of the social functions of the nation's language forms: Chinese dialects have ceded to Mandarin; professional life, link language functions and state administration have been allocated to English; and Malay, Chinese dialects and Tamil are constituted as ethnicity-bolstering. These functional allocations for the codes are slipping, however, especially through the expansion of Mandarin's

functions, a wider code than ethnicity or identity marker. It seems, therefore, that an English-Mandarin bilingual hierarchy is evolving, with Malay, Tamil and Chinese dialects appropriating and being noted as ethnicity markers and identity languages with all the attendant language shift, diglossia and functional erosion problems this status invariably entails (Fishman, 2001).

The concluding section contrasts key moments in Singapore's language policymaking history via the views expressed at different stages of time by the most senior political figures since independence, with research from prominent academics as well as popular opinion.

ADVANTAGE AND IDENTITY IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IDEOLOGY

This chapter began with and returns briefly to the 1956 All-Party Report on Chinese Education. In that same year, the government of Sri Lanka adopted an anti-English law, the official Sinhala Only Bill, a language planning act that produced civil strife and over time contributed to the outbreak of civil war (De Silva, 1998). Interestingly, it was also in 1956 that similar moves were made in Malaysia with the Razak Education Commission, which issued a national education policy stipulating that Bahasa Melayu would be the medium of instruction (Wong & Hong, 1975). The more judicious balancing of interests in Singapore produced considerable social progress and economic growth.

Striving for autonomous statehood, Singapore's policymakers were no different in their ambition from other education planners in aspiring for symmetry between the cultural and linguistic character of the population and its education system, and desiring that education inculcate local values and use local languages. Thus, after describing Singapore's education system as "unnatural" because children were taught in languages they did not speak, the Goh Report devoted considerable attention to values.

It has been argued that the present era of rapid globalisation is accelerating the disparity between the languages used in the private domain and those given prominence in public spaces and institutions. This is particularly true for those institutions concerned with the construction and dissemination of knowledge and with the certification of learning. Largely, this arises because of the vast reach and instrumental power of English-mediated education and certification. This inevitably gives rise to a tension with claims for tradition, values, ancestry and difference.

The Goh Report identified the lack of "well-paid employment" (p. 1-2) in private sector positions for its proposal to convert the Chinese-language Nantah to English instruction and examination, which occurred between 1977 and 1978. The complementarity of the economic rationale for English and a moral-cultural rationale for Asian languages featured strongly. However, from 1978, the Nantah switch provoked a restructuring of Chinese-language stream schooling more generally in Singapore, with the specific aim of enhancing English proficiency. Ability streaming was also a product of the home-school language disparity, as the report sought to explain apparently high attrition rates, compared to Taiwan and

Japan for equivalent grades, attributing this problem to Singapore's "single system of education imposed on children of varying abilities to absorb learning in languages which they do not speak at home" (p. 1-3). However, the main culprit was believed to be the pluralism of the population, since Taiwan and Japan were seen to have cultural homogeneity and monolingual education. English and ability streaming are therefore allocated to the economic function of schooling, "secular education in a foreign tongue" (p. 1-5), while the encompassing category of "moral education" counters the large-scale movement towards English as the medium of instruction. Goh inaugurated English-medium education partly in recognition of the "free choice of parents for English", but since the authors of the report assumed that intellectualised bilingualism was not possible, the design and structure of the whole system of education was based on a language hierarchy, unlike the assumption driving Canadian immersion or the European schools, which imagine and aspire to intellectualised bilingualism. The formula adopted in Singapore, therefore, is that: 1) if teaching is in English (English as LoI), there will be some loss of mother tongue proficiency; and 2) if teaching is in the mother tongues (mother tongue as LoI), there will be some loss of English proficiency. The report opted for 1) and included the mother tongue as a "moral" counter to "the more spurious fashions of the west" (p. 1-5).

It is worth reflecting on the words of Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, then Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education, who during an award ceremony for the Most Inspiring Tamil Teacher stated that studying the "mother tongue":

...helps our students to imbibe values and to appreciate the accumulated knowledge and wisdom contained in our cultural heritage. As bilingual learners, children are provided with more than one set of lens, enabling them to perceive the world and encoding their experiences in different ways. It allows them to reach a deeper understanding of their own identity, and a sense of belonging to community and country. (Shanmugaratnam, 2002)

This mother tongue support is based firmly within a broader policy:

Our bilingual policy in education remains a key social and economic imperative for Singapore, as relevant now as it has been in the last few decades. Proficiency in the English language has given Singaporeans a key advantage in a globalised economy. It gives us relevance to global companies and keeps us at the intersections of global trade and investment. It creates good jobs for Singaporeans. (Shanmugaratnam, 2002)

The conventional Singaporean distinction between advantage and identity is maintained, as in the 1950s, with a functional allocation of social role among languages. However, globalisation and the changed domestic language ecology are bringing about a blurring of boundaries, as evidenced by the Minister who, in his speech, went on to argue that English is not only "for economic advantage and the mother tongues for social identity". This claim of "multiple advantages, in an increasingly complex and interconnected world" adds to English social cohesion

and identity functions “in the common spaces that we share”, the public citizenry, while economic instrumental value is added to the “mother tongue languages” because of the economic growth and emergent prosperity of many Asian countries, nominating specifically source countries for Singapore’s major languages—India, China and the Malay-speaking neighbours of Singapore.

The clearest statement of the binary allocation of function of languages belongs to Singapore’s most prominent figure, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, now designated Minister Mentor. In many writings and speeches as well as in his guidance of the nation, Mr Lee has articulated a unique Singaporean modernity based on a blend of “Asian values” and “Western rationalism”. In his memoirs as in the preambles to official education commissions, Mr Lee expresses his thinking about language, nationhood and economy. The quotes that follow are from his foreword to the Goh Report (1979, pp. iii–v).

During the anti-colonial movement, the assertion of “one’s own language and culture was the other side of the revolt against foreign domination. The emotions of our people were often held in thrall by the Chinese, Malay, and Tamil language chauvinists.” Both riots and elation are bound up with language and culture. He recollects riots in 1954 by middle-school Chinese students “in defence of Chinese language education and culture” and the “most massive demonstration of emotional commitment to Chinese culture and education when Nanyang University was formally opened”, noting also communist agitation with “Chinese voters’ natural pride in language and culture”.

Pragmatic considerations are predominant though, because “bilingualism” is seen to have held back some pupils who would have attained higher levels had they been able “to go at their own pace in only one language and so do justice to themselves”. Significantly setting the tone of future pragmatism in language planning, he argues that “it is foolish to believe that we can ever completely divorce language, culture, and education from the passions with which people jealously guard their personal identities”. The realities of the outside world impact on language education success: “We must try to reduce the numbers of those who cannot master English and Mandarin because of their exclusively dialect home and neighbourhood environment”, as this residential policy is tied to the language aspiration of English as “the common language between racial groups, and Mandarin the common language between dialect groups” (p. v).

In such an environment “where dialects do not complicate learning”, more people will become bilingual, leading to his proposal for “translingualism” as an intermediate communication policy, that is, a kind of bilingual dialogue. Lee admonishes the writers of the Goh Report for not having addressed some crucial topics, over which he reports that there are “frequent and intense discussions in Cabinet”. These issues suggest contemporary discussions about language, culture, identity and national economic progress: “the moral and character formation dimension of education, based on traditional Confucian values, patriotism, filial devotion”. The argument is for a “blending of East and West”, with separate specification of each of the national or cultural traditions as follows: Confucian ethics, Malay traditions, and “the Hindu ethos”. The blending involves combining

these ethics, traditions and ethos with “sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry, the open discursive methods in the search for truth”. This becomes an injunction: “We have to discard obscurantist and superstitious beliefs and practices of the East, as we have to reject the passing fads of the West.” The elaboration of a set of very specific items of attributed cultural values, such as the need to “excise” nepotism that “usually grows out of this extended family net of mutual help” does not diminish the commitment to “the principal value of teaching the second language...the imparting of moral values and understanding of cultural traditions” (pp. iv–v).

However, and this principle prevails in bilingual education in Singapore to this day, the aim of authentic cultural inculcation is “Confucian beliefs and ideas, of man, society, and the state” (p. v); and this is ranked above second-language proficiency so that it should not be a goal of mother tongue education to be “nearly equal to the first language”. In effect, “Malay children should know their proverbs and their folklore... [For] the Indians, the Ramayana and the Mahabaratha provide marvellous and inexhaustible sources of stories. They are interesting in themselves. That they also carry a moral message is the genius of the culture.”

The collective effect of this treatment of cultural values, national characteristics and languages is a set of correlations: English as academic rigour, the mother tongues as ethnicity, folk identity, moral codes and tradition, which at least discursively, still prevail today.

In his memoirs *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000*, Mr Lee devotes considerable attention to education and discusses some of these ideas and ideals from 45 years earlier. In chapter 11 (pp. 145–156), entitled “Many Tongues, One Language”, which encapsulates the story of political union in the context of multilingualism, Mr Lee indicates that his three children started their formal education in Chinese-language schools, a decision both political and personal, since he and his wife had been educated in English. He defends the conversion of Nantah to English medium, arguing that “no country in South-east Asia wanted a Chinese-language university” (2000, p. 152), but vigorously defends Mandarin education, recalling personal instances of feeling cultural alienation in England, “having been educated in a stepmother tongue...not formally tutored in...Asian cultures, but not belonging to British culture either, lost between two cultures” (p. 145). The decision to school his children in Chinese “even if their English suffered” was accompanied by home support in English, but also “convinced the Chinese-speaking that I would not exterminate Chinese education in Singapore” (p. 145). University education for Mr Lee’s children was in English because their “future depended upon a command of the language of the latest textbooks” (p. 152).

Wong’s (2000) analysis of the conversion of Nantah to English medium, originally a private college operated by local Chinese whose aim was to “convey” Chinese ethnic and national traditions, described its incorporation into the new state as a transforming of “the values and cognition” of subordinated groups via the state’s work of constructing a national identity and its efforts to ensure the consent of subordinated groups. According to this analysis, so different from Mr Lee’s,

the conversion of Nantah is because it "obstructed formation of overarching Singaporean consciousness" and so removing from Chinese-medium education its maximal point, likened to a "beheading", was an integral part of the formation of this supranational consciousness.

CONCLUSION

A debate in the Forum section of *The Straits Times* in December 2003 would have brought the shock of recognition to many educators in English-speaking societies. In British, American and Australian schools, motivating young people to persist with foreign language study is a constant struggle. Many factors contribute to this, but the global power and dominance of English is important. Perhaps a prelude for future identity discussions in Singapore, or an index of current trends, these contributors debated how to keep up the motivation of Chinese students of Mandarin.

In a December 1 letter ("Our daughter is a 'Chinese language exile'"), a mother related how her daughter was transferred to an English-medium school in the United States because of "Singapore's rigid bilingual system". A week later, in a humorous parody, staff writer Kelvin Tong (2003) discussed the need to make Mandarin, of all languages, "relevant" in a society where more than three-quarters of the population is ethnically Chinese.

This debate brought into sharp relief the all-too-easy attribution of notions of "natural" languages of schooling, of mother tongue, of native speakers, of identity and cultural essences, of what is local about culture (Wee, 2000) and how identity formations combine professional status, global mobility with the local and the ethnic. Tong's article reviews the letters as rehearsing what he describes as "the usual laments about Singapore's bilingual education system" nominating "Mandarin is difficult to learn" as the first of several. The letters and the review article traverse the territory of identity, education, and its roles in economy and nation-making, and the changes occurring in the configuration of power in the contemporary world. Remarks like "Look at China" are used both to invoke the power of English and its attractiveness in China, and how this will erode "Singapore's edge", but that China's emergence as a major trading power in the world is also bolstering the instrumental case for learning Mandarin since "all roads are fast leading to China". Tan (2003) has called the work done by this kind of discursive encounter and the government policy that frames it "the management of Chinese identity and culture" and notes that its past phases of maintaining a "low key ethnic Chinese profile" have shifted to current efforts to "re-sinicize".

Exemplifying the bilingual social reality of literate discourse in Singapore, several of the writers switched between terminology and cultural reference in English and Mandarin, never translating, lamenting what they claimed as semi-lingualism, but debating identity, economic opportunity and education planning in precisely the hybrid mode their multilingual praxis made possible and necessary. A Chinese language academic commented that Singaporean children may come from either a Chinese-speaking, or an English-speaking, environment. One writer

claimed that "it all boils down to attitude". Another said that although he and his wife did not learn or speak Mandarin, all his children do, aware that China will one day count a great deal. Another mounted a spirited personal defence, refusing to be construed as "cultureless" for *not* speaking Mandarin, asserting that being an Anglophone Singaporean was reflective of "cosmopolitan Singapore, not China".

This range of views, indeed the entire debate, contrasts with the considerations of the 1956 All-Party Report, the Goh Report, the positions of education ministers in Singapore today, and the reflections of the country's most significant political leader. Singapore's collective policy talk about language classically separated public economic advantage from private ethnic identity in an overarching nation formation discourse by distributing distinctive, even exclusive, social roles to its constituent languages. The discourse is neat and its success demonstrable, but the connections, and allocated language roles, were always somewhat loose and leaky, and as the letter writers suggest, may now be fraying.

Economic globalisation challenges national economic management, and language planning-based nation-building, especially for small states, is a project constantly under construction. Other people's commercial power will impinge on the employment and economic prospects of Singaporeans, just as others' political power impacts on the security of small states. Other people's forms of Chinese and English, and probably also their Malay and their Tamil, will intrude into Singaporeans' language planning and communication patterns. Language plans have ambiguous and unpredictable effects because language esteem and utility are often contingent on broad, and "unnatural", social, political and economic conditions.

NOTES

- ¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the five anonymous readers of an earlier version of this paper for their helpful comments and constructive criticisms.
- ² An example is the series of teacher guides, readers and cultural information packs issued by the government of the Italian region of Tuscany continuously between 1990 and 2003 to integrate African, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai children into local schools. (See Collana, "Formazione e Informazione Cittadini immigrati e di etnie minoritarie", Edizioni Regione Toscana, Centro Stampa Giunta Regionale, Florence.)

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